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Speaking the same language: developing a language-aware feedback culture

Gillian Lazar and Agi Ryder

Abstract: Research cited by O'Donovan, Rust and Price (2015) suggests that feedback as part of assessment is often not delivered effectively. A key aspect of effective feedback delivery is that students need to understand feedback and also feel motivated to act on it. This article explores how educational developers can incorporate a language-aware approach to feedback when working with staff involved in learning and teaching in order to enable staff to make appropriate linguistic choices when providing feedback so that it is more comprehensible and motivational for students. It describes a piece of action research which explored and evaluated two teaching activities used on a PG Cert HE with staff at a post-1992 university, designed to promote critical awareness of the language used when giving feedback. We report on the staff evaluation of the activities devised and piloted, and consider how this project could be taken forward in future.

Keywords: academic or staff development; action research; communication; diversity; feedback

Introduction and context

Recent initiatives by the UK government have emphasised the need for Higher Education institutions to ensure teaching quality. For many early career academics, well versed in their disciplines, delivering effective teaching can come as a challenge – not only do they struggle with the practicalities of devising and applying effective classroom strategies, they may also lack the theoretical underpinning for their second profession. As educational developers working on a Post-Graduate Certificate in Higher Education (PG Cert HE) programme aligned to Fellowship of the Higher Education Academy, we aim to support staff in developing such strategies, together with an understanding of the reciprocal relationship between educational theory and practice.

Our 'student body' consists of academic staff, and staff supporting learning, such as technicians, librarians and research assistants, both at our own institution and at collaborative partner institutions. Staff members undertaking the programme represent a wide range of disciplines within the university, including, for example, nursing, animation, computing, criminology and human resources. In addition, many of the staff are bilingual, multi-lingual or speakers of English as a second or foreign language, as will be discussed later. Our programme is run part-time and is delivered either face-to-face, or by distance learning, over one calendar year. Both modes seek to create a community of learners who benefit from an interactive style of teaching, which aims to share different disciplinary perspectives and best practice in pedagogy.

The language of feedback

In line with current thinking, one key theme discussed on our course is feedback and assessment. However, research cited by O'Donovan, Rust and Price (2015) suggests that feedback as part of assessment is often not delivered effectively. There is evidence in the literature that feedback may not be understood by students (Higgins, Hartley and Skelton, 2002; Hounsell, 1987; Ivanic, Clark and Rimmershaw, 2000; Wingate, 2010), or may be encoded in ways which students find opaque or inaccessible (Hyland and Hyland, 2001). In addition, the language in which the feedback is framed may be demotivating or disheartening to students (Boud, 1995, following Rorty, 1989; Carless, 2009), or may discourage dialogue (Lillis 2003, Nicol, 2010). While much of the literature focuses on the problematic reception of the language of feedback by students, our concern is with the difficulties that staff may face in

producing comprehensible, engaging and motivational feedback for their students, underpinned by appropriate linguistic choices. This concern arises from our observations over a number of years of an emerging theme in staff members' reflective diaries, descriptions of critical incidents experienced and comments made in course assignments: the challenge of finding the appropriate language to deliver feedback, since staff worry that the words they use do not always convey the message they intend. Nevertheless, without understanding what aspects of the language of feedback are problematic for students, it is difficult to help staff to improve their production of feedback.

One key area which is often problematic for students is the use of academic vocabulary, terms such as *analyse*, *evaluate* and *synthesise* which are widely used in assessment criteria and feedback comments, but which may be unfamiliar to students (Coxhead 2000). Not only may students fail to understand this type of vocabulary, such terminology may have differences in meaning in from one discipline to another, so students with only a generic comprehension of such terms may have insufficient understanding of the meaning of the word when applied to their subject (Chanock, 2000). While current literature on feedback stresses the need to explain, discuss and apply such terminology when familiarising students with assessment criteria (O'Donovan et al., 2015), students may still struggle to understand these terms when used in feedback, unless they are backed up with clear examples of how to apply the term.

Moreover, research into the way speakers of English as a second language interpret feedback comments is useful in identifying some other aspects of the language of feedback which can prove problematic for students. A study by Hyland and Hyland (2001) in New Zealand, for example, investigated the interpretations of feedback comments made by students speaking English as a second language. The study identified the fact that teachers sought to mitigate the full force of their criticisms and suggestions 'by the use of hedging devices, question forms, and personal attribution' (Ibid: 185). In other words, teachers tried to soften their feedback by employing linguistic strategies which made their comments more tentative. For example, they used weakening devices, such as *some* and *a little*, verb phrases such as *it seems* and *I wonder*, and modal verbs such as *could*, *may* and *might*. They also specified that they themselves were the source of an opinion (personal attribution) so as to remind the reader that the feedback was the view of one person only, thereby diminishing the strength of the criticism (ibid: 198). Interestingly, this often created confusion in the mind of the students, who were then unclear as to whether or not they needed to act on the feedback provided.

There is also the danger that demotivating comments could impact badly on student confidence by using what Rorty terms 'final vocabulary' (1989, p.73; cited in Boud 1995). These are words which may even be apparently positive, but which classify 'without recourse to reconsideration or further data' (Boud 1995, p. 18) Thus, even words such as 'good' or 'rigorous' may not communicate anything of substance, while negative terms (such as 'weak' or 'poor') may simply damage students' self-confidence without helping them to improve their work. Similarly, Zsohar and Smith (2009), discussing oral feedback, claim that it is not only adjectives connoting judgments which may be demotivating for students. They note that positive comments are often followed by the word 'but', which is, in turn, followed by negative criticism. They suggest that students often discount any positive feedback when hearing the word 'but', and that the use of the word 'and' instead could be used to articulate suggestions for improvement in a way which is more supportive.

A number of scholars have argued for feedback to be more dialogic and discursively rich by promoting two-way communication between lecturer and student (Boud, 1995; Lillis, 2006; Nicol, 2010). While such an approach needs to be fostered as part of curriculum design, with multiple opportunities for receiving and responding to feedback, specific instances of feedback may shut down dialogue, rather than encouraging it. For example, the use of

statements phrased in a very authoritative manner can leave students feeling that they are simply recipients of a command, whereas incorporating questions into feedback could serve to engage students in greater dialogue and reflection.

Thus, as we can see, the literature has plenty of advice about what constitutes best practice when giving feedback to students, yet we have found that the staff on our programme struggle to apply this when communicating feedback to their own students.

Aims and objectives

As a result of teaching on the PG Cert HE programme over the past years, several questions and challenges were raised for us that echo these themes from the literature. Although we always introduce participants to effective feedback practices early on in our programme as suggested in the literature (see, for example, Hattie and Timperley 2007; Nichol and MacFarlane-Dick 2006), based on comments made in class and in their written assignments, we noticed that our staff were unsure about how to encode their feedback effectively in appropriate language. We aim to lead by example and take pride in responding to staff difficulties and thus our objective was to create a series of activities that would allow staff to put theory into practice, and prompt reflection on action in order to make linguistic enhancements to the way they provide their own students with feedback.

The key question we wanted to address was how can we raise awareness around the importance of the language used when giving feedback to students so as to ensure more effective and creative feedback practices?

Methodology

In order to be able to answer this question we adopted an action research (AR) methodology to guide our investigation. AR is considered a suitable approach for investigating an area directly linked to daily practice (Baumfield, Hall & Wall, 2012; McNiff, 2013) and this was a good fit for the project as we wanted to explore ways of raising awareness of the importance of language use when offering feedback to students, an activity we all undertake regularly.

The main reasons we choose this open-ended and developmental approach were twofold: first, it allowed us a structured reflection on our practice and second, it allowed us a way to improve our practice (Wilson, 2013). We regard ourselves as facilitators of learning and using this methodology allowed us to become agents of change (Gray, 2013).

Action research is considered a 'a significant vehicle for empowering teachers' (Cohen et al 2011, p. 361) and our findings and lessons learnt from this project are aimed at various levels: we aim to improve our own practice, that of academic developers, and ultimately the lecturers we all work with.

It is seen as a creative and transformational process of trial and error that does not aim for a fixed end point or one correct answer (Wilson, 2013, Gray, 2013). The benefit of such an approach is that the researcher practitioner has sufficient freedom to explore new ideas and follow unexpectedly interesting avenues; however, this can result in confusion and an overwhelming amount of data collected (Cohen et al., 2011). To address this we decided to draw broadly on McNiff's framework to guide our exploration in order to capture the learning from the project and provide a clear and justified account of our work (McNiff, 2013). The main stages we followed were: 1. reflect, 2. plan, 3. act, 4. observe and reflect, which we will now use to describe the various stages of the project.

First stage - reflection

While our study arose from our reflections that the staff on our programme seemed to experience difficulties in delivering feedback in a linguistically appropriate manner, we had also noted that our teaching staff is multicultural and multilingual, as befits an institution which is committed to diversity and widening participation. This led to the desire to establish the extent to which our cohort was multilingual, and in what ways, in order to better understand the participants in our project. To establish this, we asked staff to fill out a simple questionnaire indicating what languages they used in their professional or personal context. While this goal was not directly relevant to the action research being described, it enabled us to confirm our initial assumptions about the language backgrounds of our staff, thereby enriching our understanding of the context for the study.

Second stage - plan

As previously mentioned, research by O'Donovan, Rust and Price (2015) suggests that feedback as part of assessment is often not delivered effectively. We see that one aspect of this is a linguistic problem, and prompted by our initial reflections and observations, we designed some activities aimed at raising awareness of the language used when giving students feedback and maximising the opportunity for participants to be able to put into practice principles of effective feedback identified in the literature. Some of the challenges with feedback included that it was delivered using inaccessible language (Hyland and Hyland, 2001), was framed in a way which was demotivating or disheartening to students (Boud, 1995) or discouraged dialogue (Lillis, 2003). The activities were designed to prompt reflection on such issues and encourage the formulation of proposed practical solutions. Once we had used the activities with staff, we planned to gather their feedback on the activities by asking them to complete a short questionnaire as well as completing an open-ended question.

Third stage - act

The activities we will now describe were conducted in class or online over the 2015/16 academic year as part of the course instruction and embedded as meaningful tasks in the delivery of the programme. While the first activity asked participants to discuss and critique written feedback in a face-to-face context, the second one was delivered online.

Activity 1

We selected sentence-level examples of feedback, which had either been cited in relevant literature or were authentic instances of feedback given by staff which we had collected, and used them as the basis for discussion with our students face-to-face at one of our workshops on campus (see Appendix 1). By asking the course participants to analyse the type of language used in the feedback comments, we hoped to raise their awareness of the linguistic choices they themselves were making in their feedback, and the impact that this might have on their students. The examples fell into some of the pitfalls of 'poor' feedback by being framed in language that might be inaccessible or demotivating to students. One example (see no 4 in Appendix) rephrased feedback as a question in order to promote a more dialogic exchange, as recommended by Boud, although some of our participants felt that the use of questions in feedback was confusing for students. We asked participants to discuss all the examples in pairs before then discussing them with the whole group.

It is vitally important that an activity focusing on decontextualized sentence-level feedback comments needs to be contextualised within wider perspectives of what constitutes good feedback practices, so this activity formed only one small part of the total course input on feedback.

Activity 2

Our second activity was based on the activity included in Appendix 1, but as we were using it with a cohort of our students who were studying online by distance mode, we adapted it for use in an online discussion forum. With our face-to-face cohort, we were able to clarify links between theory and practice in the discussion following their analysis of the examples, but to do this with the online group we specifically directed them to relevant sources so that they could start to make the links between theory and practice themselves. We therefore asked them to address these three questions in the discussion forum:

What elements of this feedback do you find helpful and/ or problematic in these examples below? (followed by the same five examples as in Appendix)

Can you identify at least one point, and provide a reference from the literature to support your critique and reflections?

How might you rephrase one of the examples in a way that draws on the principles established in Nicol & Macfarlane-Dick (2006)? We are asking you to revise only one of the examples; however, if you find this activity particularly helpful, feel free to have a go at more than one.

Fourth stage - observe and reflect

In order to explore the reactions of our staff to the activities, participants who completed Activity 1 were asked to fill out a short questionnaire made up of a Rating Scale (very useful - not useful) (see Appendix 2), and an open-ended question on the efficacy of the activity in raising their awareness of effective ways of giving feedback. The survey was conducted shortly after the activity to ensure that participants' reflections were captured in a timely manner. This was supplemented by our own reflective accounts, captured in writing after the session and including some key discussion points raised during class. The second activity was conducted online and in writing and this provided additional information on how participants might phrase feedback in different ways and why. The survey was not administered to the participants in the online activity due to practical constraints, and this is recognised as a limitation to the study. The survey answers were collated and the answers to the open questions, as well as our reflective accounts, were analysed using open coding to identify key themes (Saldana, 2012). The codes identified were organised into key categories which serve as the basis for findings presented below.

Findings

At the beginning of the study we sought to establish the extent to which our cohort was multilingual. The result of the survey shows that there were 28 different languages spoken by a cohort of 24 people. There was a huge variety of languages from European languages, such as French and Italian, to Arabic, Mandarin and various African languages.

Therefore, our assumption that we are dealing with a linguistically diverse cohort was confirmed and we discussed the benefits of bilingualism and multi-lingualism with the participants on the PG Cert HE. It is our contention that linguistic norms (such as those around politeness, mitigating criticism, making recommendations or giving instructions) may differ from one speech community to another, suggesting that explicit consideration of such norms is a useful activity for staff on our programme. This was understood intuitively by many participants in the group from abroad, who were able to share personal anecdotes about how, when working in the UK, they needed to adjust their language to conform to standard British English norms so as to avoid cultural misunderstandings.

The findings indicate that overall, the activities had a positive reception. The analysis of the rating scale question for activity 1 indicate that 55% of participants rated it as 5, 32% as 4 and 14% as 3 where 1 on the scale of 1 – 5 was ‘not at all useful’ and 5 was ‘very useful’. This suggests that participants found it a valuable way of reflecting on various ways of giving feedback. While we did not use the scale with our online group for Activity 2, contributions to the Discussion Forum were rich and sophisticated, and staff commented that they had enjoyed the activity and found it eye-opening.

Based on the data collected from the survey and our own observations, the activities were deemed successful as they allowed staff to consciously reflect on how to compose feedback, reinforcing a student-centred approach which highlighted the importance of the language used. Staff underlined the fact that effective feedback should be constructed with the students in mind who are then expected to make use of it.

It was felt essential to use clear terms that the students would understand. This is especially important when dealing with an international student body, and using such verbs as ‘analyse’ and ‘critique’ or other verbs associated with higher levels of Bloom’s or the SOLO taxonomy (Biggs, 1989; Bloom, 1956)

Additionally, the use of colloquialisms and how the language used might translate for a student who is very literal were considered.

Feedback as a dialogue was recognised as a new learning point. The word ‘dialogic’ was mentioned to describe how the activities prompted thinking about the way feedback is delivered and received by students.

Encouragement was recognised as having a central role. Phrasing feedback in a way which addressed students as partners and did not come across as too harsh, patronising or crushing confidence was highlighted as an important takeaway message.

Such motivating language needed to be balanced out by clearly directing students to consider specific areas for future development and accompanying these with examples.

Discussions highlighted the need to correct students or offer ‘negative feedback’ without resorting to the use of hedging language (Hyland and Hyland, 2001). Hedging is often used to soften criticism, and instead alternative ways were offered to guide students on how to improve their assignments. For example, the phrase ‘I am curious ...’ was considered a viable alternative to indicate something missing, while also offering feed forward.

Discussion

The findings indicate that the activities we had devised raised participants’ awareness of the importance of language use when giving feedback, and gave them a more nuanced understanding of the possible effects of this language on their students. On the one hand, comments focused on the need to provide accessible feedback by avoiding using vocabulary which was unfamiliar to students, which is consistent with the recommendations in the literature (O’Donovan et al., 2015). On the other hand, participants also understood that attempts to appear friendlier to students, for example by using colloquialisms, could in fact make the feedback less understandable. Furthermore, while participants understood the need for feedback to be motivating and encouraging (Boud, 1995), they could also see that attempts to mitigate negative feedback, for example by hedging, could mean that a viable opportunity to promote feedforward would be lost (Hyland and Hyland, 2001). By focusing on sentence-level linguistic formulations of feedback they had gained a keener understanding of the ways that language might clarify, direct and motivate students.

The comments also highlight several practical areas for concern, such as the need to be sensitive to the linguistic background of the student who is receiving the feedback. For example, when giving feedback we should consider if the student has a good grasp of academic vocabulary, or if he or she an international student still grappling with standard British English. Linguistic sensitivity is also required for home students with varying linguistic backgrounds who may not share similar linguistic norms with their lecturers. While staff may not always have this information, the activities at least made them aware that it might be relevant for producing effective feedback. A further practical concern which arose was how to make feedback more dialogic, which led to useful discussion about practical ways of integrating formative feedback into the curriculum.

The broad application of the AR model has been a helpful way of conceptualising our project as a work in progress, and as part of a cyclical process where a number of questions are raised which highlight the need for further research as well as future plans and actions. Our intuitions that staff on our course are very multi-lingual have been confirmed by gathering data from one cohort, although how that links with the ways that multilingual groups give feedback still requires investigation. We need further research into the linguistic repertoires the staff members have been using, and the impact these may have on how they produce feedback.

While our initial data demonstrates that our participants were able to note and reflect on how the language of their feedback may impact on its effectiveness, a follow-up study could be designed to assess whether they have been able to utilise this awareness to frame their feedback more appropriately. It would be helpful to analyse and assess lecturers' feedback both before and after they have participated in our activities. A necessary addition to such a study would be to then gather the views of students receiving the feedback as to its clarity and capacity to promote dialogue and motivation.

The sample included in this paper is relatively small, though representative of the cohort itself. The project is also conducted in the context of a particular higher education institution, although we believe that many of the issues are applicable to other similar institutions, and the findings relevant to other practitioners working in similar contexts.

Conclusion

The small-scale action research project we have described was a response to a particular issue we noted among participants on our PG Cert HE programme – the challenges they faced in giving effective feedback to their students. We surmised that one of these challenges is the very language in which the feedback is communicated. Using the emergent literature on this topic as a stimulus, we devised some classroom activities designed to raise staff awareness of the linguistic choices available to them when providing feedback, and the possible effect of these choices on their students.

Participants reacted favourably to these activities suggesting that highly interactive classroom activities, grounded in the literature on learning and teaching, are a motivating way to raise awareness among staff of specific pedagogic strategies. In addition, as part of an action research cycle, this project has now raised additional research questions for us relating to the complexities of providing effective feedback in the multi-lingual context of our university, and possibly more widely for higher education in the UK. We intend to investigate these questions in future, and in the spirit of action learning, we plan to integrate our findings into the design of course activities in future.

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Appendix (Activity 1)

Discuss the following examples of written feedback on a student assignment. How helpful or unhelpful are they for a student. Why?

Some of the material seemed a little long-winded, and I wonder if it could have been compressed a little.

(cited in Hyland and Hyland 2001:197)

This essay addresses the main issues and is mostly well-focused on the question. It pursues a good structured argument and shows evidence of critical and analytical ability. It makes good use of sources and theoretical perspectives. It is generally well written and structured.

Well done for trying, but this assignment lacks analysis, so is poor. You don't seem to realise that it is not enough to just give us all the theory. Your final conclusion seems to be suggesting that pigs can fly.

You have identified three factors contributing to social unrest but what others are there? Have you fully justified each of the ones you included?

(Jolly and Boud in Boud and Molloy 2013:115)

You only mention Ward once in the essay. Are all the other ideas your own? You need to make it clear which are yours and which are hers. Have you used quotations here? Some of it sounds like it might be. Did you get some help with the editing?

(cited in Hyland and Hyland 2001: 199)

Appendix 2

We are experimenting with different types of activities to raise staff awareness on effective ways of giving feedback. We'd appreciate your thoughts on the activity we have just done.

I found this activity useful: not useful 1 2 3 4 5 very useful

Having done this activity, I take away these main points regarding giving feedback:

Biographical information

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